

Message Text

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4776

C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 11134

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: ELAB, PINT, VE

SUBJECT: LAV PILOTS STRIKE

SUMMARY. AEROPOSTAL PILOTS STRUCK SEPTEMBER 14 OVER SAFETY ISSUES AND PILOT AUTHORITY. THE MINISTER OF COMMUNICATIONS HAS TOLD THE EMBASSY HE INTENDS TO REPLACE THE STRIKERS WITH U.S. AIRCRAFT AND FLIGHT CREWS. WHILE THE DISPUTE WILL PORBABLY EVENTUALLY BE RESOLVED AMICABLE THE DEVELOPING CONFRONTATION BETWEEN THE GOV AND THE UNIONS AND POSSIBLE ATTEMPTS TO INVOLVE THE U.S. BEAR WATCHING. END SUMMARY.

1. THE EVENING OF SEPTEMBER 14 THE PILOTS OF AEROPOSTAL (LAV), ONE OF VENEZUELA'S TWO DOMESTIC CARRIERS, WENT ON STRIKE. LAV IS OWNED BY THE GOV AND ALSO COVERS SOME INTERNATIONAL ROUTES IN THE CARIBBEAN DESPITE THE FACT THAT IT DOES NOT CONSIDER ITSELF AN INTERNATIONAL CARRIER. THE IMMEDIATE CAUSE OF THE STRIKE WAS A DISPUTE BETWEEN A CO-PILOT AND A STEWARDESS WHICH BROUGHT TO THE FORE A LONG SMOLDERING FEELING AMONG PILOTS THAT THEIR AUTHORITY OVER THEIR AIRCRAFT IS BEING ERODED BY BOTH THE CABIN CREW AND MANAGEMENT. THE QUESTION OF THE SAFETY OF THE AIRCRAFT AND THE SAFETY OF THE AIRFIELDS THEY FLY INTO ALSO SOON BECOME AN ISSUE AS WELL AS A NUMBER OF MINOR DISPUTES OVER THE INTERPRETATION OF A NUMBER OF CLAUSES IN THE
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COLLECTIVE CONTRACT. THE STRIKERS FOLLOWED NONE OF THE

PROCEDURES LAID DOWN IN THE LABOR CODE AND THE STRIKE HAS BEEN DECLARED ILLEGAL BY BOTH THE LABOR AND COMMUNICATIONS MINISTRIES.

2. THE EVENING OF SEPTEMBER 15 MINISTER OF COMMUNICATIONS LEOPOLDO SUCRE FIGARELLA CONTACTED THE COMMERCIAL SECTION OF THE EMBASSY TO ANNOUNCE THAT HIS MINISTRY INTENDED TO CONTRACT WITH A U.S. AIRLINE FOR UP TO NINE DC-9 OR ELECTRA AIRCRAFT WITH FLIGHT CREWS TO COVER THE LAV ROUTES DURING THE STRIKE. THE MINISTER ALSO ANNOUNCED THAT HE INTENDS TO RECRUIT U.S. PILOTS AS PERMANENT REPLACEMENTS FOR THE STRIKERS. THE COMMERCIAL SECTION EXPRESSED SOME SCEPTICISM AS TO WHETHER ANY U.S. AIRLINE WOULD BE INTERESTED IN ENTERING INTO A CONTRACT WITH LAV GIVEN THE CIRCUMSTANCES AND EVEN GREATER SCEPTICISM ABOUT THE PROBABILITY OF MEMBERS OF THE INTERNATIONAL AIRLINE PILOTS ASSOCIATION (AFL-CIO) COMING TO VENEZUELA TO WORK AS STRIKE BREAKERS. THE STRIKING VENEZUELAN PILOTS HAVE REPORTEDLY ALREADY BEEN IN TOUCH WITH THE INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF AIRLINE PILOTS TO ASK FOR INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY FROM THEIR BROTHER TRADE UNIONISTS AROUND THE WORKS. THE MINISTER REITERATED HIS INTENTION TO GO AHEAD WITH HIS PLAN FOR REPLACING THE STRIKERS. HE WAS FURNISHED WITH SOME FACILITATIVE ASSISTANCE IN THE FORM OF NAMES AND ADDRESSES OF APPROPRIATE AIRLINE OFFICIALS IN THE U.S.

3. COMMENT: FIGARELLA HAS A HISTORY OF PRECIPITOUS ACTION AND BOTCHED LABOR RELATIONS AND IS CONSIDERED THE MINISTER MOST UNFRIENDLY TO THE TRADE UNIONS BY THE CONFEDERATION OF VENEZUELAN WORKERS (CTV). MANY QUALIFIED OBSERVERS BELIEVE THAT THE PILOTS' COMPLAINTS ABOUT AIRCRAFT AND AIRPORTS ARE JUST. ON THE OTHER HAND AN ILLEGAL STRIKE BY GOV EMPLOYEES IN THE CRITICAL TRANSPORTATION SECTOR COULD BE CONSTRUED AS A CHALLENGE TO THE GOVERNMENT. THE MOST LIKELY OUTCOME OF THIS DISPUTE IS THAT IT WILL BE ESCALATED FROM THE LEVEL OF THE LAV PILOTS AND FIGARELLA TO THE CTV AND THE FULL CABINET AND A COMPROMISE FORMULA ALLOWING THE PILOTS TO RETURN TO WORK WILL BE FOUND. U.S. INVOLVEMENT, IF IT MATERIALIZES, COULD BE TROUBLESOME. IN THE MEANTIME CONFUSION, DISRUPTION, AND CONFLICTING CHARGES WILL REIGN FOR SEVERAL DAYS WHILE THOUSANDS OF TRAVELERS ARE SERIOUSLY INCONVENIENCED.

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